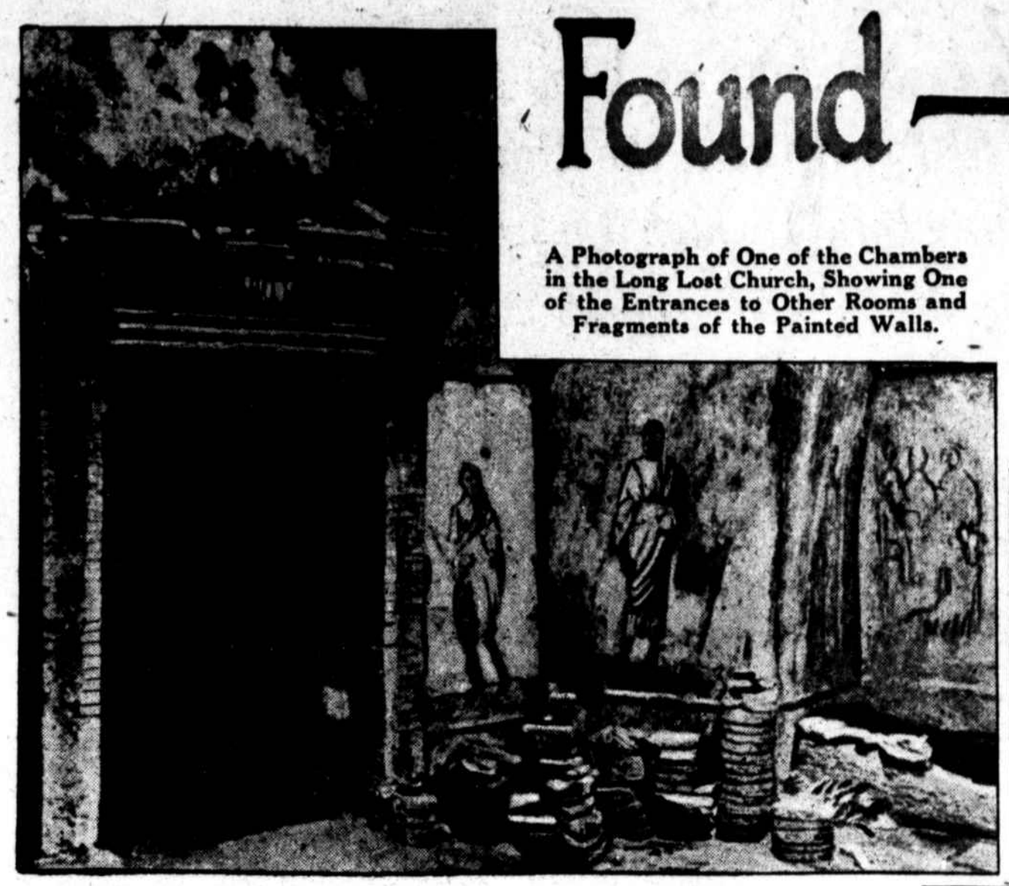
Found—The True Portraits of St. Peter and St. Paul?



A Photograph of One of the Chambers in the Long Lost Church, Showing One of the Entrances to Other Rooms and Fragments of the Painted Walls.

The Painting of St. Paul Found in the Hidden Church, for Which, It Was Thought Probable, the Apostle Himself Posed.

How the Earth Opened Beneath the Feet of a Garage Laborer and Revealed the Long Lost Underground Church Where the Saviour's Two Greatest Disciples Preached and Hid from Persecution

NOT long ago workmen were digging for the foundations of a big taxicab garage on the Viale Manzoni, an exceedingly modern avenue of Rome, Italy.

They had made an excavation about six feet deep when suddenly there was a loud crackling and one of them slid down and out of sight through a hole which had opened beneath his feet. The others scrambled out of the pit, returning with lights and ropes.

It was clear that their comrade had fallen into one of the many ancient subterranean vaults which underly the Eternal City and which, like the Catacombs, were largely the work of the early Christians who used them not only as places of worship, but as hiding places during their persecution.

But when the rescue party, lowered cautiously through the orifice that had opened so strangely, stood upon firm ground they forgot for an instant, in their wonder and awe at their surroundings, the groaning man they had come to help. Far overhead was the hole through which they had come. The circles of their electric torches flashed upon the walls of an enormous chamber. These walls were covered with paintings upon which the destroying hand of time had rested but lightly.

There was something about these paintings that was—unusual. They were life size, and in some curious way they seemed to have life in them. Their eyes looked gravely, solemnly, at these men who had swarmed down the ropes into their hidden sanctuary centuries after the hands that had painted them had been dust—and as the circles of light flickered over the walls the painted figures seemed to move.

The rescuers crossed themselves and tied the injured workman to a sling.

One of them, bolder than the rest, crept to a wide doorway and shot his light through it. Beyond was another great chamber whose walls held other mysterious paintings and wide entrances to still other chambers.

The workmen were lifted up into the street. Word of the happening was sent to Professor Paribeni, the Superintendent of Antiquities of Rome. After he and his staff had arrived, had been lowered into the place of the paintings and, hours after, had been drawn up again, the garage operations were abruptly and officially ended. And forever!

For Professor Paribeni announced that from his examination he believed that what the unfortunate workman had fallen into was probably the first real Christian church in Rome.

And that among the paintings on the walls were two which were, apparantly, authentic portraits of St. Peter and St. Paul!

Those who had been digging for the garage had been, in fact, exactly like men who, sinking a gravel pit, suddenly find they have tapped a diamond mine. The Roman authorities immediately took charge and completed the excavations.

When this was done the scientists found an underground building of the most astonishing construction. It was a mixture of halls, stairs, recesses, galleries and crypts so mixed and confused as to baffle description. At the beginning, it would appear, it consisted of two funeral chambers, built by one Aurelius Felicissimus for himself and other freedmen whom he calls in the identifying inscription, "Brothers" (Fratres). This was meant not in the ordinary sense of the term, of course, but in that of religious brotherhood.

The entrance to the underground maze of rooms, and so on beyond, was through these chambers and skilfully hidden. There were other hidden entrances, or, at least, exits which were used in times of danger. It is likely, indeed, that the two funeral places were used only as a blind to deceive the curious or the "Christian hunters" of the Romans.

How the Chamber of the Ancient Church Into Which the Workman Fell Appeared After the Excavations for the Taxicab Station's Foundations Had Given Way to Careful, Scientific Clearing Away of Dirt and Debris.

The place must have been built not many years after the death of Christ and certainly during the lives of His Disciples. And the church—for church it clearly was—must have been held for some reason peculiarly sacred. This is shown by the unique care which was expended upon it to camouflage its real character.

Wall paintings which are now easily recognizable as scenes from the Gospels were so disguised as to deceive any ordinary spy or observer. A pagan visitor, making his way in, might have thought himself in a chapel devoted to the worship of Orpheus or Mithra—although the Christian artist was actually depicting in a number of ways the figure of the Saviour.

In one realistic painting of the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount, the figure of Jesus is disguised as a shepherd among his flock and seated upon a pinnacle of rock with an open book on his knees. There is another group which clearly represents Christ preaching in the Temple of Solomon, but which to the uninitiate would have seemed Orpheus or even Dionysus revealed to their worshippers. Still another portrays the last ride of the Saviour to Jerusalem.

Further, to aid in the confusion aimed at, here and there were painted groups of no Christian significance whatever—a landscape, a procession of nude and semi-nude people. The earnest and devout worshippers knew at what pictures to look and knew how to read their significance under the disguising symbolism.

The question arises then, why was it thought necessary to take all these elaborate precautions to insure the safety of this particular place of worship?

Professor Paribeni believes that its answer lies in the two remarkable paintings which he calls without hesitation true portraits of the two greatest Disciples. If this were a church to which both St. Peter and St. Paul came frequently—used, indeed, as a headquarters—the early Christians would certainly have gone to extraordinary lengths to have kept it free from suspicion by the authorities.

The two paintings themselves bear inherent evidence of having been painted, if not from actual posings by the originals, then at least by an artist who had frequent opportunities to study his subjects and who carried in his mind a wonderfully faithful and detailed image of them.

They are not "ideal" heads. In St. Peter we have the strong, heavy, even rough features, instinct with single-minded determination that we would look for in the fisherman who cast aside his nets to follow the Saviour. In his face we may reverently glimpse something of what it was that made Jesus change his name from Simon to Petrus—a rock—and say of him: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."

The Wall Painting Supposed to be a True Portrait of St. Peter, Found in the Mysterious Subterranean and Ancient Place of Worship at Last So Strangely Revealed.

A Painting of the Twelve Apostles in One of the Rooms of the Underground Building.

In the portrait of St. Paul we clearly have the patrician that we know he was. The face is filled with intelligence and enthusiasm; the eyes are those of a man who has studied much and thought much.

If Professor Paribeni is right and these are the true portraits of the Saints then he has given adequate reasons for the curious camouflage of the subterranean chapel, its maze of secret crypts, meeting halls and so on, and its elaborate system of escape exits.

How did all knowledge of such a sacred place pass away? And how did it finally become covered with ground on which trees and grass grew, which later gave way to paved streets and the tread of modern traffic? These are not hard questions to answer. At the time it was built it was on the outskirts of the city. As Christianity gained ground the necessity for secrecy and such subterranean places of meeting became less and less. Fewer and fewer visitors came there. Beautiful, great churches began to rise everywhere in the open. Time worked steadily on, covering the entrances with dirt and building foot upon foot of earth partiently over its hidden roof.

At last the time came when it was entirely covered—no trace left on the surface to show it ever had been. The process is not uncommon. In all ancient cities from time to time such age-concealed places are found.

It is not at all surprising that these early Christians, despite the peril to them involved in it, tried to perpetuate the features of St. Peter and St. Paul, for they were the central figures in Roman Christianity, both having suffered martyrdom in Rome, it is said, upon the same day, though some traditions hold that it was in different years.

St. Paul suffered martyrdom near Rome at a place called Aquae Salviae, now Tre Fontane, east of the Ostian Way, some two miles from the Basilica of San Paolo Fuori le Mura—"St. Paul outside the wall"—where he lies buried. This martyrdom took place toward the end of the reign of Nero, when persecution of the Christians was at its height—that is, 67 to 68 A. D.

St. Peter was crucified in Rome, according to all accounts, during the Neronian persecutions, which lasted from 64 to 68 A. D. Origen states that he "was crucified at Rome with his head downwards, as he himself had desired to suffer."

This probably took place in the Neronian Gardens, in the Vatican. Tradition has it that the bodies of St. Peter and St. Paul lay for a time in a vault on the Appian Way, on the spot where the church of St. Sebastian was erected and dedicated to these two Apostles in the fourth century. Constantine the Great had a great basilica erected over the tomb of St. Peter at the foot of the Vatican hill, later replaced by the modern St. Peter's, in the sixteenth century.

St. Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, who put the missionary spirit into the new faith, and went out with the other Apostles to teach it, was converted just outside Damascus by that historic vision in which he was called to account for attacking Christ and Christianity.

While the church just discovered has peculiar claims of sanctity, it cannot be compared, of course, for magnitude of undertaking with the Catacombs of Rome, which are, without doubt, one of the wonders of the world. They hold, some have estimated, no less than six million Christian tombs and extend nine hundred miles or more. It is figured that if all these galleries were set end to end in tunnel form they would run the length of Italy.

The Catacombs are not only astounding in construction, but are at the same time the greatest puzzle to science. No one knows how the persecuted Christians ever managed to take out the tons and tons of earth which had to be removed—nor what they did with it when it was taken out.

The entrance to a catacomb often occurs at some great sandpit, into which some of the dirt might have been taken by night to be carted away openly by day, as if the sand were being removed. In other cases the dirt must have been taken out in sacks and secretly dumped into the river Tiber. Those who remember their "Count of Mote Cristo" will recollect what a tremendous problem it was to its "Edmund Dantes" when in prison and trying to tunnel his way out to make away with the comparative spoonsfuls of earth which he had to remove.

These underground galleries are usually entered by a stairway running down from thirty-three to forty-nine feet or more, from which the tunnels diverge in all directions, being from ten to thirteen feet high and just wide enough for two gravediggers to pass, one behind the other, carrying the bier of the departed. The graves, or tombs, are in the sides of these galleries. In places there is another stairway leading to a still lower level, where a network of galleries similar to the one above is found.

In some instances there are as many as three or four stories going down into the depths of the earth.

The bodies were wrapped in cloths, without a coffin, laid in a hollow dug out at the side of the corridor, and a slab of stone or marble then closed up the tomb. In some spots the galleries were broadened out so as to form chapels where the faithful met to worship. The inscriptions on the slabs closing the tombs are of tremendous importance, because through them it has been possible to establish the fact that many thousands of the Roman patricians were members of the proscribed religious order and were buried here.

While Imperial Rome was carrying on the wicked and luxurious life that terminated eventually in its downfall, thousands of these Christians who had turned from the pagan gods and goddesses to the simple, holy faith were worshipping in this gigantic underground maze. What other surprises there may still be for science under the soil of Rome is uncertain. It may be that even more important discoveries are in store.

The burials took place in the Catacombs beginning with the first century and continued until the time of Constantine the Great, when the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rome made secret burial no longer necessary.